

My Life Is Not As I Expected

I arrived late at the altar of marriage,
long past my fertility use-by date,
On our family tree
my line ends abruptly.
Unable to seed the future,
I mine the past
dig deeply,
into veins of familial misfortune
bear witness to stories,
long suppressed
behind sugar-starched, lace curtains.

My revelations inspire fear
in those who hide the truth
behind forced smiles.
Or seal their lips
with fermented libations.
They would have me write fiction
cloak history in gossamer,
present images that
bear no resemblance
to those whose genes we share.

They whisper that I,
childless, unfettered
free of impressionable children,
have abandoned self-control
in favor of self-indulgence.
Perhaps they are right,
for I disdain high pedestals
that require vigilant balance.
Instead, I tread the fallow fields
and spread the stories
of lives lived when life
had to be raked from barren soil.

My written words
shall carry forward our history,
that it may be uttered
by the young who follow me.
Unlike those before us
who discovered truths
and tried to express them
in a time and place

where their voices could not rise
above a whisper,
this next generation will be armed

with knowledge of the past
And able to build a life
On the pedestals of truth.
I send this gift into the future
It will be my offering
from beyond the grave.

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Final Goodbyes

This time, I part the iron gates alone,
Lilies heavy in the cradle of my arms.
20 years ago,
I was one of four grieving girls
Brought here to bid farewell
To the portal
Through which we each had passed.

A year later, we came back
And lowered the shell
Of the father we never know
Into the waiting arms
Of the wife
Who cherished his name
Long after he'd left her.

"Together in death,"
My sister said,
as if that made everything
Alright . . .
Washed away the years
Of longing,
Stilled my anger.

Did I alone recall summer evenings
When, shielded by darkness,
My mother voiced regrets?
While I nursed secret dreams
That he'd come home cleansed,
Make us whole again,
Banish the shame we felt?
But he never did. Tired of waiting,
I set off to find solace for my pain.
Still, I search.

Angelic statues
Gaze across the grassy knolls.
Bronze markers hug the earth,
Sometimes inverted

To reveal vases
Filled with new blooms.
Gifts, outside death's doorway.

As I search
The manicured glade
I wish for a North Star
To guide me to my family's plot.
Is this a pathway?
Or do I tread upon
Someone's unmarked bones?

Why does this familiar place
Yield no names like mine?
Have the givers of my life moved?
Should I drop my pain here
To seep into the earth?
The sky grows dim.
I must go where I am expected.

I set the lilies upon a just-filled grave,
Whisper farewell.
to its unnamed occupant.
The wind, caressing my face,
Bids me farewell in return.
I close the gates
And walk away.

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Boxes

Memories of boxes
keep me contained,
stymie the exuberance I feel
with each new dawn.

Her voice, loud and clear
despite the grave
warns me to stay in line
be not the first
the new to try.

But all is new to me
For I've not lived before
And carry no memories
of repercussions
from failed attempts
at self-expression.

Boxes lined her dressing table.
Each contained a memento
some cherished, some scorned,
all solid-as-plaster
holding up,
holding in -
holding out
hope for resurrection
Never to be set free
like me.

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Claiming My History

Though long separated from my roots
I claim southern heritage.
I, who hated my South Carolina birthplace
and those there who held me inferior,
because of my skin color
now proudly hail the South
and its formidable strength.

My mother refused to leave her home
though it dishonored her dreams
and destroyed her family.
She held fast, stayed the course
assuring me that one day
I would understand her refusal to flee up North.

She was right. Now I understand
the chains that held her captive.
Memories like thick molasses
coated the pain of her daily interactions.
History entwined with moss on Cypress trees
and white magnolias flourishing from gnarly branches
fed her faith and kept her going.
Raging storms that threatened destruction
tossed her ship about,
etched lines around her eyes,
took her breath away. Still, she stayed the course
to give me a home and an identity,
in a place where children like me
often became invisible.

No silver spoon served my early meals
from China bowls on which my name was scribed
but loving arms protected me from harm
And planted seeds as grand as any man's,

I grew in spirit and in flesh
Soon yearned for even better than the best
That was arrayed before me in my youth.
And then, I returned, pen in hand,
eyes and ears wide open,
to wrest my birthright from lips long sealed
And pay tribute to this gift inside me
That has survived long enough to be opened.

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A Lasting Impression

My father IS no more,
and was not, when he was,
At least, not for me.
My mother spoke no words of him
Though often I caught her dreamy-eyed,
Adrift in a sea of passion
that caused her skin to flame.
(I could only guess it involved him
since I knew she loved no other man.)
Startled, as if discovered in transgression,
she'd chastise ME, as if it were I who had sinned.

He disappeared before I could record his face,
And no man-made images of him inhabited our house.
So, I fanned the embers my sisters tried to drown,
Begged them to paint me a picture.
They did, using our bodies as reference points.
Said my oldest sister's lips were full, like his,
Our brother's high forehead was a perfect replica.
My piano playing sister's slender fingers rivaled his own.
And me? I had inherited his heavy-lidded eyes.
Still, that was not enough for a lasting impression.

Now, I stare into my father's casket
And long to touch his face,
But am afraid to mar the powder that separates us.
So instead, I memorize what I see: gaunt hands
Crossed upon themselves. Strong chin. Silent lips.
Hair grey at the temples. So dignified, so peaceful.
Did he go willingly, not caring that he was leaving behind
A daughter in need of a memory to last her lifetime?
I whisper, Daddy, and spill tears onto his silent face.
Then, I turn away, tightly clutching my lasting impression.

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A Gathering of Crows

A boisterous murder of crows convene
Settle in pecking order upon a sacred site
Wings finally freed from wasteful exertion
Eyes intent, focused inward, reflecting.
The cawing cacophony defies comprehension
Yet, like water over ancient river rocks,
They soothe weary passers-by, draw them close
In hopes of absorbing this life force.
Under cover of darkness, protected by one another
The murder finally sleeps. And dreams new dreams.
Morning breaks. Feathers rustle, then spread.
Beaks feed upon tender morsels, newly brought to light.
Soon, they will return to where it all began
Fortified, renewed. Eager for the journey
Anxious to explore challenges yet unseen -- but sensed.
Ready to crow.

Written during summer-of -the crow, July 15, 2007

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Tears and Laughter

(In-Memorium, for Lisa Sullivan, my beloved niece)

When death claims a loved one
The heart cries out.
But anger does not quell the pain,
And tears cannot assuage the longing.
When the loved one is young,
The misery is multiplied by regret.
For milestones never reached,
Feats never accomplished,
Potential never fulfilled. . .
In the valley of the shadow of death,
The list of complaints grows long.
And yet, if our loved one cried every tear,
And laughed all their laughter,
They completed their assignment in this life
And could turn the page to pursue their journey in the next.
Those of us left behind can only press into service
The lessons they imprinted on our hearts
While we cry all of our tears, and laugh all of our laughter.

The Stage

Forty is too young for a star to leave the stage
And enter the wings alone.
Yet, she did -- this child I loved beyond reason.
Was she unafraid at the calling,
And went willingly? Or did she resist,
Pleading for time to complete her self-less dreams?
You were her favorite," they said. "She loved you so much..."
In the valley of the shadow of her death
These words bring no consolation,
Only regret and guilt.
I should have seen... should have insisted...
Should have done something to save her.
A river within consumes me.
I see, and feel, nothing
Want no consolation
From strangers or friends.
Instead, I whip my wounded soul,
Hoping to bring forth tears that will cleanse my flesh
And connect me to the spirit who lies beyond the vale.
But nothing can bridge the divide. She is gone, gone forever.
Like candle flames,
Photographs flit across my mind.
Comforting me, assuaging my guilt.
Reminding me of the love we shared.
The orchestra plays its overture
While tears burn pathways down my cheeks,
And meet in the valley near my heart.
From afar, she cues me to into the spotlight.
I wipe my eyes, take her cue, and walk on stage.

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Friendship (for Ann and Linda)

Often burned
In the flashfires of friendship
I shield my flesh with distance
Until I can no longer resist
the pull of my heart's desire
And dash into the circle
Where I dance with pure abandon
But always retreat
just before the music ends
While I am still intact
Though full of longing
For yet another encore
Within the flames.

Solace

In times of fear and stress,
I calm myself by reciting the Gettysburgh Address.
That historic gathering of melodic words
soothes the angst of modern life.
I can almost hear Abe's voice –
sonorous with the heavy burdens
of the country he governs –
lifting his words, like smooth stones
and floating them across a bloodstained battlefield
where soldiers await marching orders
for a war far from over.
Somehow, it taps a deep, primordial vein.
Puts my cares in perspective,
and lets loose upon my spirit
a hope that I too can rise to the occasion.
Assures me I am not alone.
Gives me the courage to stand,
and fight for what I believe,
and for what I want.
It makes me feel
I am but one part of humanity's puzzle.